

Felicity Hand and Esther Pujolràs-Noguer, eds.
Relations and Networks in South African Indian Writing

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Reviewed by Riaan OPPELT

Relations and Networks in South African Indian Writing is a very important book. It sheds light on writings by Indian South African authors that are not often privileged in academic study, both inside and outside South Africa. At a time of the preponderance of decolonization discussions at South African universities and their attendant questions of selection, there may be further dangers of losing awareness of writing that emphasizes patterns of connection between diverse South African communities. Rather than a limiting either/or, which harks back to apartheid-era essentialism and categorisation, South African life has always been creolised and its literature cannot but reveal the cultural intimacies of exchange. This collection's introduction posits that "to understand [...] the South African Indian experience as a constitutive component of Indian Ocean thassalogy requires a more nuanced investigation of the relationship between self and other than that elicited so far." (9) The book's contributors do dynamic work at pointing out how much literary and cultural value has always been available in Indian South African writing.

The book is very well presented and edited (although uMkhonto weSizwe is misspelled, on p. 134), with the chapters carefully arranged and often speaking to one another. The seamlessness of the book's studies is prioritized, proposing a cohesive set voiced by eclectic contributors drawing on wide arrays of sources. None of the chapters are overly theoretical and the primary literary texts are often approached through close readings and compelling interventions.

Lindy Stiebel's chapter presents a survey of South African Indian writing and shares a focus on memory writing before and after the 150-year commemoration of the arrival of Indians to South Africa in 2010. At the core of the survey is Stiebel's study of "plantation literature" and she ends the chapter showing the continued diasporic reach of South African Indian writing to newer countries after 2000. Felicity Hand's chapter is neatly coupled with Stiebel's and presents a close reading of Aziz Hassim's *The Lotus People*, including a critique of gender inequality in Hassim's writing. Hand also pays attention to how *The Lotus People* depicts a short-lived period of solidarity between Indian and Zulu South Africans during apartheid.

Juan Miguel Zarandona's essay on Ahmed Essop reveals the lack of international scholarly inquiry into certain South African writers, in this case on the work of Ahmed Essop in Spain. Zarandona's comparative selection of South African writers may be questioned but, at heart, the chapter is a strong motivation for further recognition of Essop's work. Salvador Faura's chapter considers historical connections between writing from different periods and the practice of re-inscription. Faura studies the fifteenth-century Middle Eastern poet Muhammed Fuẓūlī's *Leyla and Mejnun* (with its own reinscriptions) of the twelfth-century Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi's *The Story of Layla and Majnun* and its influence on Achmat Dangor's complex *Kafka's Curse*, which in turn offers a South African reinscription of the classic tale.

Isabel Alonso-Breto's chapter on Farida Karodia is intriguing in that Karodia is an important writer but *Boundaries*, her most recent published work, is not an obvious

choice. Alonso-Breto writes about transnationalism and glocality in South Africa in the twenty-first century, yet *Boundaries* presents limited opportunities to engage with South African Indian points of interest within these focus areas. The inclusion of this chapter is persuasive, however, because of its theoretical framing of the “transnational turn” in South African literature after the year 2000. Esther Pujolràs-Noguer’s chapter on Shamim Sarif’s *The World Unseen* is possibly the outstanding chapter in a strong collection. Border crossings, in terms of emigration as well as sexual and gendered boundaries, and the cartographies of desire that Pujolràs-Noguer traces in Sarif’s text are explored. Pujolràs-Noguer’s enthusiastic analysis looks at intimacy and Sarif’s female protagonists’ experiences of *becoming* Indian South Africans. The novel’s characters and their transgressions, development and creation of “home,” Pujolràs-Noguer suggests, show how Sarif “imagines a community at the crossroads of nowhere and everywhere” (120).

Modhumita Roy contributes a close reading of Ronnie Govender’s novel *Black Chin, White Chin* and concentrates largely on its form, which resonates given that Govender is better known as a playwright. The chapter highlights the novel’s fictionalized biographical elements and an initial *bildung* structure that transforms as the narrative progresses. M.J. Daymond’s chapter on Imraan Coovadia is an intricate reading of ambiguity, which is a feature of Coovadia’s work. The two Coovadia books discussed (one playful and comedic while the other is a layered variation of detective fiction), with their generational bind, look at pre-apartheid/apartheid history and post-apartheid disillusionment.

J. Coplen Rose offers a striking but lengthy piece on Ashwin Singh’s play *To House*, although it is striking how many different readings the play invites. Coplen Rose navigates theoretical possibilities with a rich analysis of the play’s characters. More chapters on plays, doubtlessly Govender’s, would have benefited the book. Farhad Khoyratty’s chapter, “‘Doing Time’: Temporal Disruptions in Dr. Goonam’s and Fatima Meer’s Prison Experiences,” is a fitting conclusion to the book, a crucial reminder of Goonam’s and Meer’s prison experiences during apartheid.

While thinkers like Rajendra Chetty and Meg Samuelson would have been welcome in the collection, their work is often referenced by a number of the contributors and the book ensures that the field of study is being seriously engaged. Forthcoming work by Alexandra Negri also looks closely at the correlations in the representative literatures of “Coloured” and South African Indian authors. Meanwhile, one can hope that the reception of *Relations and Networks in South African Indian Writing* will generate discussions and renewed interest in the primary texts which are studied here.